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SUBJECT: FIRST EVER MOSLEM AMERICAN COUPLE VISIT CEMENTS NEW  
RELATIONSHIP WITH MAURITANIA

¶1. Summary: IIP and ARS speakers Mrs. Fatima (Jane) Casewit and Mr. Daoud (Stephen) Casewit visited Mauritania from September 6th - 10th, 2009. Post capitalized on the timing of their visit to refresh recently renewed ties with the Mauritanian government through informal gatherings with local government, religious and civil society leaders. The couple met with the Minister of Islamic Affairs alongside the Ambassador (9/7), visited a well-known local Islamic charity and distributed US government assistance (9/8), met with the directors and went on a tour of the Islamic Institute's Manuscript Conservation Lab and American Corner (9/8), led a roundtable discussion with 30 University students on Islam in America (9/9) and spoke flawless Arabic to a crowd of mostly local Imams at the over 150 person annual Embassy Iftar (9/9). They attended informal Iftar dinners nightly to break the fast with local religious leaders, journalists and civil society leaders. Their pioneering visit - the first of a Moslem American woman and Moslem American couple to Mauritania - was very well received and helped post cement important ties and gain access to local religious and civil society leaders at a critical moment for US - Mauritania relations.

¶2. On Monday September 7th US Ambassador Mark Boulware and Daoud and Fatima Casewit met with the newly appointed Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Ould Neini. While there Neini led an animated discussion in Arabic with the Casewits on tolerance in Islam explaining that Islam privileges non-Moslems living in Moslem countries by giving them more rights than Moslems. This discussion took place almost three months after an American citizen was murdered in the capital city Nouakchott. Minister Neini was very pleased to meet the couple, and the meeting proved fruitful as the Minister spoke two days later alongside Fatima and Daoud at the Embassy sponsored Iftar (para 8 & 9).

¶3. On their first evening in Mauritania the prominent Islamic Scholar Imam Hamden the US Ambassador Mark Boulware and his wife Nora Jean Boulware as well as Fatima, Daoud and the Public Affairs Section to an Iftar at his home. Much of the evening conversation focused on terrorism. Imam Hamden is very active and enthusiastic about joining forces and methodology in the fight against terrorism. He believes that the biggest challenge facing moderate imams and religious leaders is the refusal of extremists to speak with them and listen to their ideas. This conversation came amidst an upsurge of extremist activity in Mauritania and calls from civil society to create a dialogue with alleged Salafists in prison. Immediately following the Iftar, the Casewits went to the Olympic Stadium where they joined hundreds of Mauritanian's in the nightly Tarawith prayer, where Mauritanian men and women pray in separate rings around the stadium during Ramadan.

¶4. On Tuesday September 8th the Casewits and a delegation from the Public Affairs Section went on an official visit of the well known Mauritanian Islamic interfaith NGO El Awkaf. The delegation brought 200 sanitary kits, t-shirts and backpacks donated by the US Embassy to add to their daily Ramadan food distribution to needy families. The director of the NGO, Ahmed Mahmoud Nahwi explained to the delegation that the Mauritanian charity began in the countryside giving out animals (cows, goats and camels) and adapted to modern

demands in 1982 with donations of food, houses and land. The main goal of the charity, according to the director, is to effectively distribute the wealth of generous Mauritians to the poor.

15. Following El Awkaf, next door at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Islam, ISERI, the Casewit's met with the Director, Sidi Mohamed Ould Mayaba, his brother, as well as the head of research Ahmed Taleb Salem. Mayaba explained that ISERI, the most prominent Islamic institute in Mauritania with over 5,000 students, hopes that the election of President Aziz and his recognition as Mauritania's president signals a new era of bilateral relations and increased cooperation with the US Embassy. The University's Manuscript Lab was funded through a 2002 donation of 25,000\$ and a 2009 donation of 12,500\$ from the Embassy's Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The visit gave the Casewits an opportunity to see a part of Mauritania's unique cultural heritage, perusing through 11th century handwritten manuscripts and seeing firsthand how US support has helped preserve and promote this legacy. Through these funds, the lab has acquired air conditioning, aluminum and glass casings, cardboard to protect individual manuscripts, and computers and scanners for a digital library. Around the corner from the lab the University's American Corner provides English learning materials, Arabic and English literature and 8 computers with internet access.

16. That evening, Deputy Chief of Mission Dennis Hankins and his wife Mira Hankins hosted an Iftar at their home for the visiting speakers and guests. Of 24 total invitees, the 16 men and 8 women came mostly from civil society, among them prominent journalists and human rights advocates. At the two men's tables topics of local politics and terrorism in the Maghreb were discussed. Local journalists complained that the Algerian press publishes in an ever

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increasing volume misinformation on "terrorists in the desert" in an effort to manipulate regional public opinion. At the women's table, topics pertaining to Mauritanian women in particular, including slavery, girl's education, forced feeding and trafficking were discussed. Two prominent women's advocates, the geologist and Mauritanian television personality Irhabia Mint Abdel Wedoud and anti-slavery advocate and Deputy at the National Assembly Malouma Mint Bilal, spouse of renowned former slave Boubacar Messaoud, shared conflicting opinions on the persistence of slavery in Mauritanian society and local political will to eradicate the practice. The Iftar was covered favorably on two websites with photos, a French and an Arabic site:  
[http://www.tawary.com/spip.php?article112;](http://www.tawary.com/spip.php?article112)  
[http://www.rim-asso.org/spip.php?article582.](http://www.rim-asso.org/spip.php?article582)

17. On Wednesday September 9th, Fatima and Daoud met with 30 students from the English Department at the University of Nouakchott and local staff and Americans. They first introduced themselves and asked the audience to do the same and then explained the story of their discovery of and conversion to Islam in Morocco. Fatima stressed the participation of Moslem women their communities giving the example of Moslem-American women lawyers in the Washington DC NGO Karamah which defends Moslems' human rights in the US. She also talked about how American Moslems observe the holy month of Ramadan in the US by distributing free meals to the needy. Students were very interested in discussing US foreign policy in Moslem countries and the issue of terrorism. They felt that Americans need to make a clear-cut distinction between Islam and terrorism - something that is blurred for them in the international press. There was also a lively discussion of the religious and philosophical basis of jihad in Islam, and everyone agreed that the terrorist acts portrayed by the media have nothing to do with Islam. They spoke of the two jihads, the one within oneself as opposed to the external; the former being paramount to Islam. Some students talked about the place of other religions (Christianity and Judaism) in Islam, and advocated tolerance between the world's main religions. This discussion was planned for one hour, but was so absorbing for the speakers and audience that it lasted almost three hours. All invitees were given IIP publications on Moslems and Moselm life in America in Arabic and English.

18. Later that evening at the annual Embassy Iftar over 150 local

Imams - and for the first time prominent women including two recently appointed Ministers - attended. Due to threats of rain, the venue was changed at the last minute and the Embassy tennis court was transformed with tents, traditional rugs, mattresses and pillows, and two separate eating areas for men and women were created. Thousands of copies of IIP publications including "Being Moslem in America", "Islam in the USA" and "Barack Obama: In His Own Words" in Arabic, French and English were placed on each invitees dinner table and offered as parting gifts on the way out. After the prayer was broadcast through speakers to the audience and the fast was broken, guests left for two separate male and female prayer areas. Ambassador Boulware then gave remarks focusing on the President Obama's outreach to the Moslem and African worlds, exemplified in his Cairo and Accra speeches, and the mutual challenges facing Mauritania and the US with respect to the wave of violent extremism confronting the world as a whole. Following this, Mauritanian Minister of Islamic Affairs, Ahmed Neini thanked the Ambassador and welcomed again Fatima and Daoud to Mauritania, who he had met earlier in the week. Next, Fatima spoke about her special experience with Islam highlighting that it has taught her many lessons - one of the most important - to be patient. Daoud spoke next and explained that he is not the typical American Moslem because he has spent decades in the Arab world. He retraced his story with Islam and mainly his altered and improved relationship with his parents after converting to Islam from Christianity. He explained that visiting Mauritania had long been a dream for he and Fatima and he was very thankful to be sharing the holy month in the special historic land of Mauritania.

¶9. Many distinguished VIPs attended including an official delegation comprised of the Minister of Interior and Decentralization, Mohamed Ould Boilil, representing the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moulaty Mint Moctar, Minister of Social affairs, Children and Family, Maty Mint Hammady, Commissary In charge of Promotion of Investments, Diabira Baccary, President Aziz' Advisor, Mohamed Ould Sidi Secretary General of Foreign Affairs and Ahmed Ould Hamza, Mayor of Nouakchott. National television and radio stations, TV Mauritanie and Radio Mauritanie covered the event and played coverage of the Ambassador speech several times a day in both Arabic and French, over the period of 4 days.

¶10. On the morning of Thursday September 10th Fatima visited Mariam Diallo's Orphanage, the sole of its kind in Mauritania where over 30 children live currently. Mrs. Diallo is a local hero who has rescued abandoned children for decades, bringing them up in a loving and supportive environment. The embassy has a long and sustained relationship with her institution, having at one point donated the

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van that sends the children to school daily. Fatima encouraged the shy youth to recite Koranic verses and praised their knowledge and memory. Fatima also helped distribute backpacks and hygiene kits to the children.

¶11. Later in the afternoon, Fatima gave a presentation focusing on Moslem Women in America at the human rights NGO conglomerate Forum National de Droits de L'Homme, FONADH. There were a total of 30 civil society leaders in attendance, and one journalist; mainly women and several men. The controversial head of the NGO protecting trafficked women, AFCF (Association Femmes Chef des Familles), Aminetou Mint Moctar, mentioned that in a recent speech given by the Imam of the Central Mosque in Nouakchott he said that Moslem women should not work, cannot lead a Moslem country. He justified this by explaining that the traditional centers of Islamic learning never allowed female participation. In response, Aminatou wrote an editorial in the popular French online site CRIDEM decrying his message and explaining that it is precisely that very sentiment that is keeping women behind and preventing Mauritanian society from progressing. Lalla Aicha Sy, a vocal lawyer and NGO director, said that Mauritanian men prefer their wives stay at home and remain ignorant. Many women agreed that this sentiment does not reflect the practices of early Islam as the Prophet himself asked questions regarding the rules of purification for women and on many occasions women in the Prophet's household were the interlocutors and even the interpreters of the religious guidance that affected women's ritual purity. Diattabe Diop, a journalist from the French language weekly

L'Eveil Hebdo covered the event for the papers Senegalese edition in mid-September and is planning to print a similar article for the Mauritanian version in late September.

¶12. Impact: A long-term dream realized for Fatima and Daoud, visiting Mauritania was a special trip for them and the mission alike. Having lived in neighboring Morocco for decades and having had a son who spent time in a rural Mahadra in Mauritania, Fatima and Daoud integrated seamlessly and felt very at home in Mauritania.

This was evident in their interactions with Mauritaniens who often commented on their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Through their excellent language skills, with flawless Arabic and French, post gained access to new audiences and leaders and took advantage to meet and cement relationships. These meetings proved especially fruitful helping post further main public diplomacy MSP goals. As a pioneer, Fatima is the first female American Moslem and together, they are the first couple and family that post has ever hosted. Informal reactions were overwhelmingly positive, many Mauritaniens were surprised to meet an American couple with no Arabic roots, who spoke Arabic so well and knew and had studied their culture and religion. Over 300 people met personally with Fatima and Daoud, and through media coverage in print, radio and television, the number reached is over 1,000 and spans regionally.

¶13. Challenges: Programming during Ramadan in the hottest period in Mauritania is very challenging for visitors and staff alike. Universities are closed and events are at a minimum during the day. In addition, Mauritania experienced the heavy rain and flooding plaguing the entire West African region just before their visit. Power outages affected even the best hotel where the couple was staying, adding to the challenges. Despite these issues, the program was a smash hit, in large part due to the flexibility and adaptability of our guests. Special thanks go to AF/PD Deputy Director Bruce Wharton and ARS Director Donna Winton for their support without which the program would not have been possible.

HANKINS